

# SPITSBERGEN

21 JUNE – 2 JULY 2009

## TOUR REPORT

This year's tour to Spitsbergen was an extended version of our previous tours, now lasting eleven days instead of eight, allowing greater chances for meeting large white Bears! We were the first ship of the season to circumnavigate the island of Spitsbergen, with some bold and expert decisions from Brandon our Expedition leader, and Oleg the ice-loving Captain that allowed us to stay just ahead of pack ice that closed in around other ships behind us, and also permitting us to explore the best areas around this archipelago for 'charismatic megafauna'. We travelled 1125 nautical miles, made eleven beach landings and nine zodiac cruises, but most importantly, we saw an unrivalled 13 different Polar Bears! This included six seen in just one morning, a mother with the cutest of young cubs, and huge males that were wonderfully close to the ship in the dense pack ice.

Our rather small and select group met up in Oslo, and after a comfortable night took a flight north to Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen. Under a clear sky we flew over the mountains and fjords, the plane stopping briefly in the northern city of Tromso before heading out over the Arctic Ocean. As we approached Spitsbergen, we passed over pack ice and snowy mountains before dropping onto the spartan landing strip. Greeted by our first (stuffed) Polar Bear at the baggage reclaim, we were met by staff from our ships operators and ferried into the village of Longyearbyen, our bags being taken direct to the ship. We had a short time to wander around the curious prefabricated town, and make a foray down to the shore to find our first birds. Our first Arctic avifauna appeared in the form of stunning Snow Buntings singing their cheery songs, Glaucous Gulls, Arctic Terns feeding along the shore, and a flock of nine King Eider among numerous Common Eider here of the distinctive *borealis* race.

We were picked up and ferried to the harbour where our ship was anchored offshore, and the Quark expedition staff met us on the quay and transferred us by zodiac to the Akademik Shokalskiy, our home for the next eleven days. Our introduction to the ship included the mandatory lifeboat drill, plus a fine supper as we headed out through the Isfjord to the western side of Spitsbergen. Soon after 'setting sail' we met our first Brunnich's and Black Guillemots, Little Auks, Black-legged Kittiwakes and 'blue' Northern Fulmars.

The following morning we made our first landing of the cruise at the curiously named Ny London, where we were introduced to the system of *not* being able to wander freely due to the ever-present danger of Polar Bears, probably the only mammal to actively predate humans! We were adequately guarded by several staff with rifles and even a pump-action shotgun, plus some signal pistols to fire bangers at the bears which would hopefully scare them off, so as they wouldn't have to be shot! Here some of us took the gentler option of staying close to shore while others headed off on a 'charging' walk up the hill. We struck lucky with up to four Long-tailed Skuas, one of which was obviously sitting on a nest and another that flew in and perched on a post just above our heads, a pair of Long-tailed Ducks called from the bay, and the cheery tinkling song of Snow Buntings could be heard all around. After lunch back on board the ship we made another landing close to the 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier, preceded by a zodiac cruise along some cliffs that had breeding Atlantic Puffins, Brunnich's Guillemots and Barnacle Geese, while on land we found an Arctic Skua on nest, many bathing Black-legged Kittiwakes bathing in pool and a male Rock Ptarmigan high on a cliff face. Back aboard the ship we enjoyed a 'ship-cruise' further into the Lillehookfjord that provided us with marvelous views of fantastic scenery, the mirror-like surface of the water reflecting the stark patterns of mountains and snow. We had a good look at our first Bearded Seal here, on an ice floe right next to the ship as we glided by at slow speed.

From here we cruised through the 'night' northwards, so that in the morning we awoke at anchor off the island of Fugelsangen, with grey skies, low cloud and drizzle that threatened our chances of landing. After breakfast however, the fog dispersed and we went ashore at Fugelsangen amid the clamour of thousands of lively Little Auks, for one of the major highlights of the trip. Inserting ourselves on the edge of the talus slope, we spent a thrilling couple of hours enjoying the spectacle of these delightfully cute birds cackling and purring to each other, periodically taking off en masse in a 'dread' where they would shoot out to sea low over our heads and then return to perch on the little rocks above their nest cavities, some offering us intimate looks at their mating behaviour. Dragging ourselves reluctantly back to the ship, we sailed on around the corner into the Raudfjord. As the sun emerged onto a glassy sea, we set out on a relaxing zodiac cruise, where numerous Brunnichs Guillemots crowded onto small ice floes or dived around our boats, some of the many thousands that crowded onto the high ledges of the cliff above the Hamiltonbukta glacier. We saw many tracks of Polar Bear here, but despite intense searching as we sailed the ship into the fast ice, there was no sign. The splendour of the scenery more than made up for it, with the snowy mountains mirrored in the calm waters and shown off to perfection in the sunshine. The day wasn't over yet however, and we cruised northwards towards Mofen Island through the evening, first making a slight diversion to cross the 80 degrees north latitude (which we toasted en masse with a slug of vodka) before going as close as was allowed (500m) to the island which is a strict nature reserve. A heap of toothy Walrus's lay on the sand, rather far but we had some great looks at a few in the water close to the ship, while a few Pale-bellied Brent Geese were visible nearby. Here we also saw three or more smart adult Sabine's Gulls, our first Great Skuas

and three Pomarine Skua, before noticing the clock was close to midnight and that it was time for some sleep!

The next day began well, as we found ourselves anchored in the Woodfjord. Soon after waking, a cursory scan of the landscape revealed the unmistakable shape of a Polar Bear walking on a distant shore! It disappeared from view, long enough for some breakfast to be hurriedly consumed before it was relocated from the bridge. We jumped into the zodiacs and set off in pursuit, finding that the animal had covered a lot of ground by the time we reached it, but we had some great views of this female before she disappeared over a ridge. Hurrah! I think it's fair to say that this was the reason we were all here, and yours truly was very happy to have found the first one before the Captain or Expedition leader! We made a short landing nearby, and then had some fun returning to the ship as the ice had moved and blocked our retreat, but we eventually bashed a way through. We headed further into the Fjord system, and approaching a large area of fast ice we spotted a female Polar Bear with a large year-old cub roaming about on the ice, playing and jumping from the ice for a swim. After some prolonged views of these fantastic animals, (with a single Ivory Gull making a brief appearance) the ship beat a retreat, headed out of the fjord, and began sailing towards the Hinlopenstretet, or Hinlopen straits.

The next day began early with a 0515 wake up (almost like on a proper Birdquest!) and a pre-breakfast zodiac cruise, along the spectacular seabird cliffs of Alkefjellet where thousands of Brunnich's Guillemots were breeding. It was rather rough, wet and cold, but exhilarating nonetheless, especially when an Arctic Fox appeared just above the beach, foraging along the bottom of the cliff and giving some excellent views. Back to the ship for breakfast, then we sailed further into the Hinlopen Straits and made a landing on a desolate beach at Augustabukta, where a habitat of polar desert revealed a few small plants, some Purple Sandpipers and a single Sanderling on the beach, plus an Ivory Gull that flew past. Continuing southeastwards, we cruised along the edge of the third largest ice-sheet in the world that covers the island of Nordaustland. Ice littered the surface of the sea, and another couple of Ivory Gulls were seen passing the ship. Driven indoors for dinner, we were soon called outside once again as a Polar Bear was spotted, in sleeping pose with his neck on the ice. He stayed in that pose as we cruised past through the ice, towards yet another beast that had been spotted a couple of kilometres ahead. This one also showed very well, and we were thrilled to have seen a total of five bears so far on this trip. We found a further four Ivory Gulls in this area, none of which stayed around for long, obviously intent on finding the leftovers from a Polar Bear kill. A quiet night of crunching through the ice passed, and the following morning we slowly moved through the pack ice on the eastern side of Barentsoya and Edgeoya islands. It was here that we saw six bears in a morning! The first was a large male that was fairly curious and gave superb views, with another mother with a second year cub within sniffing distance of them. We continued along the edge of the ice and found another single male, and then a mother with a small yearling cub, resting after gorging on a seal whose carcass was left nearby. They moved off as we hove into view, and the mother swam between ice floes with the youngster hitching a ride on her back! So cute! We continued slowly through the

pack ice for the rest of the day, with the option of several lectures and a lovely evening zodiac cruise among the pack ice some 50 miles from land. Aside from the opportunities for taking lots more photos of ice, a Pomarine Skua shot overhead and many Brunnich's Guillemots swarmed through the air on their way to points unknown.

After a night of pushing our way southwards through the ice along the east side of Edgeoya Island, we reached the Thousand Island archipelago at its south end, and anchored off the island of Bolshoya. A landing was planned, until we spotted a Polar Bear roaming the island, however the place was alive with birds so we set off on a zodiac cruise around it. To our surprise we found another Polar Bear, this one with a prominent scar on his left flank, almost certainly eating all the eggs on the island judging by the yellow yolk all over his face! Staying offshore we watched a lively colony of Little Auks, Atlantic Puffins, Arctic Terns, Black-legged Kittiwakes, on the water were numerous Red Phalaropes, Common Eiders, Long-tailed Duck, while onshore were Snow Buntings, Barnacle and Pale-bellied Brent Geese. As we departed this area we had a great look at a male Walrus on an ice floe, and then we headed through the ice across the Storfjord towards the south end of Spitsbergen Island.

The next day we awoke at anchor in Hornsund – a large Fjord system on the west coast of southern Spitsbergen, and after breakfast boarded the zodiacs in a heavy swell for a visit to the Hansbreen glacier. We began with a cruise in and out of some rocks shaped by the sea with Barnacle Geese and Glaucous Gull nests atop them, then landed on the beach for a walk on the glacier itself. Welcoming the chance for some exercise, we skipped across the icy top, peered into crevasses and marched down again. Back to the ship for lunch, then away in the zodiacs to another beach at Gashamna, where we had a rather low-key walk across the alluvial fan crisscrossed by many streams running down from another glacier. We enjoyed close views of a tame Arctic Skua, while scores of male Common Eiders formed bachelor groups offshore, along with lively Black Guillemots. Back on board the ship we had an al-fresco barbeque on the deck, then just as this was being cleared away we spotted several bright yellowish-white shapes slipping stealthily among the ice floes. Beluga! We watched them rather distantly from the ship as they surfaced periodically among the fast-ice, and some of our number took to the zodiacs in pursuit of these shy and elusive cetaceans, but predictably they were not seen again...

The next morning we awoke to rain and wind at our anchorage in the Bellsund, but nevertheless made a landing at Recherchefjord, where we picked our way through a profusion of wildflowers and moss spread across the hillside – a good day to be looking down, as the rain persisted and birds were few. We shifted anchorage after lunch, and made a second landing for the afternoon at Burbonhamna, where hundreds of Beluga bones from 17<sup>th</sup> century whaling lay heaped up on the beach. We headed out on a circular walk up onto the hillside, the highlight of which was a female Snow Bunting sitting tight on its nest in a small cavity on a slope.

We then sailed through the 'night' to the island of Prins Karls Forland on the western side of Spitsbergen, and in so doing completed our circumnavigation of the island, the first ship of the season to do so. We hoped to make a landing on a low beach where several Walrus lay heaped together, however the weather was not in our favour, and the more intrepid among us had a rather wet zodiac cruise up and down the beach to see the animals more closely while others just watched through scopes from the ship. From here we cruised into the Isfjord, and had a gentle zodiac cruise at Trygghamna where large numbers of Common Eider loitered, with a good number of King Eiders also present. There were large numbers of Arctic Terns and a pair of Great Skua, a Red-throated Diver and our only Ringed Seal of the trip. From here we moved a short distance to spend our final afternoon at the remarkably bird-rich Alkhornet. High above us on the cliff, emitting a distant roar were thousands of noisy Black-legged Kittiwakes and Brunnich's Guillemots, while along the rocky outcrops by the beach were many nesting Glaucous Gulls and Barnacle Geese. The air rang with the chimes of the Snow Bunting, and we saw a pair attending a nest in a shattered rock. Arctic Skuas behaved positively benignly as we passed within metres of their nest, and Arctic Foxes scampered along the moor, making curious barking noises as they did so.

This was a splendid way to finish our trip. Following this we enjoyed our final dinner and said farewell to our expedition staff and ships crew, and disembarked the following morning in Longyearbyen, rather sad that this marvellous expedition was over. There was still time for some final birding, and we took a walk up to the Husky kennels. Here scores of Common Eider and feisty Arctic Terns made their home in close proximity to the noisy dogs that provide safety from predation by Arctic Foxes. We found an Ivory Gull here, which typically didn't hang around, and our only Dunlins, Common Ringed Plover and Eurasian Teal of the trip. We also enjoyed our final singing Snow Buntings, before it was time to head for the airport and fly back into temperate climes, and to reacquaint ourselves with darkness after eleven days of continual sunshine. This trip is absolutely superb; I cannot recommend it highly enough!

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

### GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*: Although this is a fairly common breeding bird in Spitsbergen, (with an estimated 500-1,000 breeding pairs) we only saw them around Bolshoye island and at Trygghamna in Isfjord.

### PROCELLARIIDAE

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*: One of the commonest birds around the archipelago, often following and circling the ship. There are thought to be between 500,000 and 1,000,000 pairs breeding in Spitsbergen, however we did not see any major colonies. Almost all of the birds seen were of the dark morph, often known as 'Blue' Fulmar, and quite a lot of plumage variability was noted. 'Blue' Fulmars are typical of these high latitudes,.

### ANATIDAE

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*: A widespread breeding bird in Spitsbergen, we saw them regularly along our route, although not in large numbers nor at close range. On several occasions we saw them flying back and forth along the slopes below some of the seabird colonies, and a few were seen feeding on the boggy grassy area at Recherche fjord. Although this is supposed to be the commonest of the three geese in Spitsbergen, with a breeding population of between 12,250 and 18,800 pairs, we saw more of the following species. The Spitsbergen population (currently estimated at 42,000 individuals) spends the winter in Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*: Another handsome and widespread breeding bird, seen well on many occasions. Birds were seen sitting on nests on rocky islets and on cliff ledges at 14 July Glacier and at Alkhornet. The entire Spitsbergen population of Barnacle Geese spends the winter in the Solway Firth in south-west Scotland (particularly at Caerlaverock Reserve), and stages on the archipelagos of the Helgeland District in West Norway in spring, and on Bear Island in autumn (although there is evidence that some birds make the journey from Spitsbergen to the Solway in a single hop!). This population has shown a dramatic increase from as few as 550 individuals in the 1950s to about 27,000 in recent years, thanks to increased habitat protection and greatly reduced hunting pressure throughout its range.

Pale-bellied Brent *Branta [bernicla] hrota*: The least common of the three breeding geese in Spitsbergen. We only saw them at Mofen Island where there were seven birds visible at some range, and also seen from the zodiacs as we circled Bolshoye Island. The Pale-bellied Brents breeding in Spitsbergen, along with those breeding in northeast Greenland and Franz Joseph Land, belong to a discrete population that spends the winter in northern Denmark and around Holy Island in north-east England. This is one of the smallest goose populations in

the world; numbers were reduced to as few as 2,000 individuals in the late 1960s, but under protection have since increased to about 7,000.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Two drakes appeared on the muddy pools near Longyearbyen. This species is a regular straggler from the mainland, and has nested in Spitsbergen.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*: Much the commonest duck in the islands, encountered almost everywhere. The concentration of nesting females around the husky kennels (a fox-free zone!) at Longyearbyen was interesting. Elsewhere, there were many groups of 'bachelor' males, while the females were presumably on nests. The form on Svalbard is the northern race *borealis*, in which the males have an orange-yellow bill. The breeding population on Spitsbergen is estimated at 13,500-27,500 pairs.

King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*: An early entrant to the tour list with a flock nine seen on the sea at Longyearbyen, mostly males sporting their blue heads and orange bills. Apart from three seen in flight at Raudfjord, we didn't encounter them again until we visited Trygghamna where there some ten or more, and then we finished up with close views of four females by the husky kennels. According to the latest estimates from BirdLife International, there are between 300 and 1,000 pairs of King Eiders breeding in Spitsbergen.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*: Good views of these handsome ducks in various locations, starting with a vocal pair at Ny London, calling from the sea close to their nest (which we didn't find out about until later!) Also seen at Bolshoye Island, in Bellsund, Hornsund, and at Longyearbyen. The total breeding population in Spitsbergen is estimated at 500-1,000 pairs.

#### TETRAONIDAE

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*: A single male seen high on a cliff at 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier was the only one of the trip. The local race, *hyperborea*, is endemic to Svalbard and Franz Josef Land.

#### CHARADRIIDAE

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*: A small number of these were seen on our last morning near the husky kennels at Longyearbyen. This is a rather scarce breeding bird in Spitsbergen, with a population of only 50-400 pairs.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: A single example in its rich summer plumage was seen on the beach at Augustabukta. This is another very scarce breeding wader in Spitsbergen, where the total population is estimated at only 20-100 pairs.

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*: The commonest breeding wader in Spitsbergen and on our trip was usually the only one present. They could be remarkably tame as they scurried about, with several instances of 'song' recorded, particularly at the 'greener' sites in Hornsund and Bellsund, plus they were fairly numerous in

Longyearbyen. The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at 2,000-10,000 pairs.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Only recorded at Longyearbyen where three were seen on our final morning. Only 100-200 pairs of Dunlin breed in Spitsbergen, but the population appears to be increasing.

#### PHALAROPODIDAE

Red Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: Perhaps the most attractively coloured bird on the islands, we encountered them in several places, with some ten seen rather distantly from zodiacs near Worsleyhamna, two were by one of our zodiac landings in Bellsund, and our best and closest views were at Bolshoye Island where there were at least 26 birds. Definitely more attractive as 'Red Phalaropes' in their breeding plumage than as the 'Grey Phalaropes' that we are more accustomed to seeing in winter around the coasts of Britain. Between 200 and 1,000 pairs of Red Phalaropes breed in Spitsbergen.

#### STERCORARIIDAE

Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*: One adult was seen well flying low over the ship near Moffen Island, followed shortly after by a poor view of two more. Another bird was seen during our 'zodiac ice-cruise' to the east of Edgeoya Island. These were presumably non-breeders, as the nearest known breeding grounds are in Novaya Zemlya.

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*: Much the commonest skua in Spitsbergen, present throughout the areas that we visited. While they hold a fearsome reputation for attacking intruders near their nests, (even seen attacking the Polar Bear on Bolshoye Island!) they seem habituated to people in bright yellow parkas and were not bothered by our close approach on several occasions, the pair at Alkhornet being a memorable encounter. All the birds seen were light-phase, dark-phase birds being much commoner at lower latitudes, such as in Scotland. The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at 1,000-2,000 pairs.

Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*: Only a few pairs of Long-tailed Skuas breed in Spitsbergen, presumably because of the complete absence of lemmings, their preferred prey during the breeding season. We had superb views one at Ny London, that flew in and landed on a tall post just above our heads. This was one of four birds seen there, including one that was clearly incubating.

Great Skua *Catharacta skua*: Singles and pairs were observed on a number of occasions along our route; the first were at Moffen Island, then more were seen as we passed around the eastern side of Spitsbergen, on Bolshoye island and at Trygghamna. This is a relatively recent arrival in Spitsbergen, first recorded breeding in 1976, but now seems not uncommon. Latest estimates put the breeding population at 200-350 pairs.



## LARIDAE

- Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini*: Some three or four striking adults were seen close to Moffen Island, the most regular breeding site for this species in Spitsbergen where there are typically fewer than ten pairs.
- Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: Common and widespread. A beautiful gull, but also the main avian predator in the islands, and the cause of those Little Auk 'dreads' at Fuglesangan. We had some nice views of birds at nests in several places, best of all at Alkhornet where some large chicks were also seen. The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at 4,000-10,000 pairs.
- Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*: A single adult flew along the beach at Poolepynten (the Walrus beach where we couldn't land) This remains a scarce breeding bird in Spitsbergen (50-150 pairs), although it first colonised the islands way back in 1930.
- Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*: An abundant bird throughout the islands, breeding in large numbers together with the Brunnich's Guillemots at Hamiltonbukta, Alkefjellet and at Alkhornet in Isfjord. It was an almost constant companion of the ship, feeding close to the vessel in the disturbed water as we crunched through the pack ice. The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at 265,000-275,000 pairs.
- Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*: Without a doubt the speciality bird of the High Arctic. A minimum of thirteen birds were seen, with our first appearing on the same day as our first Polar Bears, and then appearing at regular intervals (although never hanging around for long) with the most being seen on the south side of Nordaustland as we nudged through the ice near Kong Karls Land. All were immaculately white adults, and we even heard them uttering their strange tern-like calls. A single bird appeared at the Longyearbyen husky kennels on our final day but didn't stay for long. The most recent estimate of the breeding population in Spitsbergen is about 200 pairs.

## STERNIDAE

- Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*: A common bird seen throughout our cruise, although it wasn't until our last morning at Longyearbyen that we got fully dive-bombed by birds that had eggs close to the road. Plenty of display was seen at other sites, and at Bolshoye island they were busy attacking the Polar Bear that seemed intent on eating every egg on the island! The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at more than 10,000 pairs.

## ALCIDAE

- Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*: A very common breeding bird on Spitsbergen, with an estimated total breeding population of 850,000 pairs! We saw big colonies at Hamiltonbukta, Alkefjellet and Alkhornet, and they were abundant at sea around these areas. This is very much the High Arctic counterpart of the Common Guillemot, breeding no further south in Europe than northern Norway and Iceland.

Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle*: Common and widespread, although always seen in singles or small parties, and often seen well from the zodiacs. The birds we saw were of the race *mandtii* that has larger white wing patches. The Spitsbergen breeding population is estimated at 20,000 pairs.

Little Auk *Alle alle*: Probably the biggest avian highlight of the trip was the spectacle of these cute little birds at the Fuglesangen colony. We were able to sit right on the edge of the colony as the noisy little fellows came and went in sudden 'dreads', when they would all fly out to sea en-masse only to return a minute later. Courtship was in full swing as birds extended their throat pouches, chattered and crooned to each other, plus at least two episodes of copulation were witnessed. They nest among the boulders of the talus slope, where there is an abundance of suitable cavities and hollows beneath the rocks. We also saw many at sea, and birds were also seen at nesting sites near 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier. The Little Auk is much the commonest seabird in the archipelago, with a breeding population estimated at between one and three million pairs.

Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*: Small numbers were seen well on the cliffs at 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier in Krossfjord, and also at Bolshoye island. Others were encountered on a number of occasions at sea around the south-west of Spitsbergen. The Arctic subspecies *naumanni* is distinctly larger and has greyer cheeks than the birds we are more familiar with further south. The total breeding population in Spitsbergen is thought to be in the range of 10,000 pairs.

## EMBERIZIDAE

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*: The only breeding passerine in the islands, we found them to be fairly common, with the striking males often heard singing their cheery little song from prominent perches. We found a female brooding her nest in a small cavity on a slope at Burbonhamna in Bellsund, and also saw a pair visiting a nest with young at Alkhornet, a site where they were vocal and visible.

## MAMMALS

Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus*: Just a handful seen on our trip, with a single at the base of the seabird colony at Alkefjellet, and at Alkhornet we saw at least two, including some excellent close views of one that had a slight limp, barking occasionally at another animal. This attractive little fox is still hunted in Spitsbergen.

Polar Bear *Thalarctos maritimus*: Clearly the main draw of the tour as a whole, and we enjoyed a fantastic run of luck with these beasts. Our first appeared on a distant shore at Worsleyhamna in Woodfjord, requiring pursuit by zodiac for a closer look. We didn't have to wait long for more, and further across the fjord we found a mother with a second-year cub on the ice. The following evening as we ploughed through pack ice nearer Kong Karls Land we found another two, and the following morning we saw a further six on the pack ice as we slowly pushed southwards along the eastern side of Barentsoya and Edgeoya. Our

final two were on Bolshoye island, where one of the beasts had a big wound in its left flank. It was clearly separated from the pack ice and judging from the egg on its face it was working its way through all of the nests on the island.

That made a total of 13 animals seen by us on this tour – surely a record!

- Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus*: Our first was a big male swimming just offshore at Fuglesangen, then after our side trip to 80 degrees north we got as close as we were allowed to Moffen Island, where a heap of 40 animals were rather distantly visible on the sandbar. At least three or four showed well on ice close to this location, and then in pack ice near Edgeoya island we had our best views, with two animals resting on the ice that the Captain was able to get very close to. We had planned to get close up and personal with them at Poolepyneten but the weather meant that we could only have a zodiac cruise along the beach where there were just 12 animals, also clearly visible through the scope from the ship. All were males, as indeed are all the Walruses in Spitsbergen at this time of year, as the females go elsewhere to give birth to their calves.
- Harp Seal *Pagophilus groenlandicus*: A group that was spotted from the bridge porpoising ahead of the ship disappeared as quick as they appeared, allowing only the briefest of glimpses.
- Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina*: Just two recorded, in the Hornsund area.
- Ringed Seal *Phoca hispida*: Many unidentified Seals may have referred to this species, but one was seen on the ice at Trygghamna in Isfjord.
- Bearded Seal *Erignathus barbatus*: Our first was seen in Lillehookfjord, casually laying on the ice close to the ship, then we saw several more at regular intervals during our voyage, always sporting his marvelous whiskers!
- Northern Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*: A single was seen very briefly close to the ship as we headed north to Moffen Island, the only sighting of the trip.
- Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*: A splendid extra course to add to our al-fresco BBQ as we lay at anchor at Brepollen in Hornsund. As the food was being cleared away, as many as five of these beasts appeared. At first distant and difficult to see, we eventually had reasonable views as they slipped stealthily along the edge of the fast-ice.
- Caribou (Reindeer) *Delphinapterus leucas*: Often seen on distant hillsides, wherever there were large areas of snow-free tundra. Causing more than one misidentification as Polar Bear, their whitish coats were visible at great range. The endemic Spitsbergen race *platyrhynchus* is much smaller and noticeably shorter in the leg than Reindeer occurring further south, and may be a good species.